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SUBJECT: MOFAT Previews FM Yu's Upcoming Visit to Tokyo

Summary

1. (C) In a preview of Foreign Minister Yu's upcoming visit to Japan, MOFAT DG for Northeast Asia Cho Tai-young noted the potential for negative fallout from next year's 100th anniversary of Japan's annexation of Korea. He said a pending Japanese decision on textbook guidelines relating to the Liancourt Rocks would pose an early test for the new government in Tokyo, particularly in advance of the sensitive anniversary. Observing that no Japanese Emperor has visited the ROK, Cho said the difficulty of predicting public reaction to such a visit would probably mean Emperor Akihito would not accept President Lee Myung-bak's invitation to come to Korea. There are multiple ROK-Japan senior-level meetings scheduled for the coming weeks, beginning with a ROK-Japan-PRC trilateral in China. End Summary.

Asia's Past Much More Than Prologue

2. (C) During a September 23 lunch with Emboffs, DG Cho noted that unresolved historical issues remain very much alive and influence nearly every aspect of Korea's relations with China and Japan. Cho claimed that hardly a day went by without a mention of some historical dispute in Korea's major daily newspapers. He remarked that with Japan, historical issues may dominate 2010 as it marks the 100th anniversary of Japan's annexation of Korea. The two countries were consulting on how best to ensure that the anniversary becomes an opportunity for healing old wounds and not creating new ones.

Timing is Critical: Textbook Guidelines

3. (C) Deputy Director for Japan Affairs Lee Dong-gy, observed that a key early hurdle for the new Japanese government will be a decision on textbook guidelines relating to territorial sovereignty over the Liancourt Rocks (claimed as the Takeshima Isles by Japan and the Dok Islets by the ROK). Cho and Lee said that a decision by the new government to support the existing policy of strong language claiming Japanese sovereignty could incite a new wave of anti-Japanese sentiment and get bilateral relations off to a rocky start. Furthermore, the timing of the announcement could also complicate the scheduling of high-level official visits. (Comment: Japanese Embassy colleagues told us they are

hoping to squeeze in ministerial and summit meetings before December, when the textbook decision is expected to be announced. They said Tokyo fears a strong ROK public backlash could again freeze high-level exchanges with Seoul. End comment.)

Managing Public Expectations

14. (C) Cho related that latent public antipathy toward Japan over historical issues was a major headache for him. He observed that Seoul was still uncertain how best to prepare for the 100th anniversary, but sought to consult with Tokyo as soon as possible. As for the ROK position, Cho explained, there were two "camps." The first camp argued that Korea should ask the Japanese government to make a dramatic conciliatory gesture to preempt an upsurge in anti-Japanese public sentiment. The second camp argued that Seoul should seek to downplay the anniversary and create no public expectations of a grand gesture. Cho personally subscribed to the latter philosophy, suggesting that the government had little ability to control public opinion regarding such a volatile issue and therefore could never guarantee that a grand Japanese gesture would be well received.

Emperor Visit: Crickets from Tokyo

15. (C) Noting that ROK President Lee Myung-bak had invited Japanese Emperor Akihito to visit Seoul in 2010 to "put an end to the sense of distance" between the two countries, Cho

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said the ball remained in Tokyo's court. The Blue House had politely prodded Tokyo with President Lee's September 15 Kyodo News Service interview in which LMB reiterated the invitation. Cho pointed out that the emperor had visited China in 1992 but had never come to Korea; fear of public protests, impossible to control in democratic Korea, was likely the reason.

Stream of High-Level Official Exchanges in Pipeline

16. (C) DG Cho indicated that following UNGA, senior ROK and Japanese leaders would have multiple opportunities to meet formally before the end of 2009. Deputy Director Lee noted that Foreign Minister Yu would meet his Japanese and Chinese counterparts in Shanghai on September 28 and that Yu would then fly to Tokyo on September 29 for further bilateral consultations. Lee (and our Japanese Embassy contacts) also indicated that PM Hatoyama would most likely make his first official visit to Seoul in early October en route to the trilateral summit in China. DG Cho explained that the summit agenda had two major items: reviewing the progress of the "concrete projects" the three countries agreed to at last year's meeting and discussing important regional issues, North Korean denuclearization foremost among them.

STEPHENS